DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 894 HE 008 209

AUTHOR Gilmour, Joseph E.
TITLE Sources of Conflict Between Institutional Researchers and Decision Makers.
PUB DATE 28 May 76
NOTE 15p.
AVAILABLE FROM Office of Budget and Planning, 315 Old Main, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pa. 16802

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Personnel; Communication Problems; *Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; *Decision Making; *Higher Education; Information Utilization; *Institutional Research; Organization; Personnel Policy; *Researchers; Role Perception; Staff Role; Staff Utilization; Values

ABSTRACT

Identified are several sources of conflict between institutional researchers and decisionmakers and suggested are several means for reducing these sources of tension. Conditions that can lead to conflict include: differing organizational roles, value conflicts, status discrepancy and ambiguity, and communications breakdowns. Factors identified for the reduction of conflict include the degree to which both parties can establish satisfactory interpersonal contact, divide labor in clear and acceptable ways, give and receive information from one another, communicate large volumes of information efficiently, derive satisfaction and rewards from working together, gain easy access to each other, and persist in communicating new and abstruse ideas to one another. (Author)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED127894

Sources of Conflict Between Institutional Researchers and Decision Makers

Joseph E. Gilmour

University Planning Specialist

Office of Budget and Planning
315 Old Main
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 863-0405

HE008209

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

May 28, 1976

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies several sources of conflict between institutional researchers and decision makers and suggests several means for reducing these sources of tension. Conditions which can lead to conflict include: differing organizational roles, value conflicts, status discrepancy and ambiguity, and communications breakdowns. Factors identified for the reduction of conflict include the degree to which both parties can establish satisfactory interpersonal contact, divide labor in clear and acceptable ways, give and receive information from one another, communicate large volumes of information efficiently, derive satisfaction and rewards from working together, gain easy access to each other, and persist in communicating new and abstruse ideas to one another.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is addressed to two questions concerning the relationship between decision makers and institutional researchers. First, what conditions contribute to conflict in the relationship? Second, what factors minimize conflict? Neither of these questions has received much attention in the institutional research literature, nor, for that matter, in the literature of public administration, organizational behavior, or business administration. This paper represents a first attempt to analyze the relationship and its dynamics. The framework used for the analysis is based on Havelock's (1969) theory on the dissemination and utilization of knowledge.

Before proceeding further, two concepts require clarification. First institutional research is that activity "dedicated to assisting the policy-formulation and decision-making processes of college or university governance" (Mason, 1971, p. 219). The institutional researcher, then, plays essentially the same role as policy analysts and operations researchers supporting decision makers in other types of organizations.

Second, conflict is inevitable in any organizational context and, in fact, not all conflict is detrimental to the organization. Coser (1956) distinguishes between conflict as a means to an end and conflict as an end in itself. As a means to an end, conflict may actually facilitate decision making. Churchman and Schainblatt (1969) maintain that formalized adversary proceedings between decision makers and institutional researchers, based on analytical principles, can be used to generate more thorough evaluations of decision-making problems. As an end in itself, conflict can lead to interpersonal tension, a lack of communication, and deterioration in the effectiveness of the decision-making process. This paper is addressed to the reduction of the latter type of conflict.

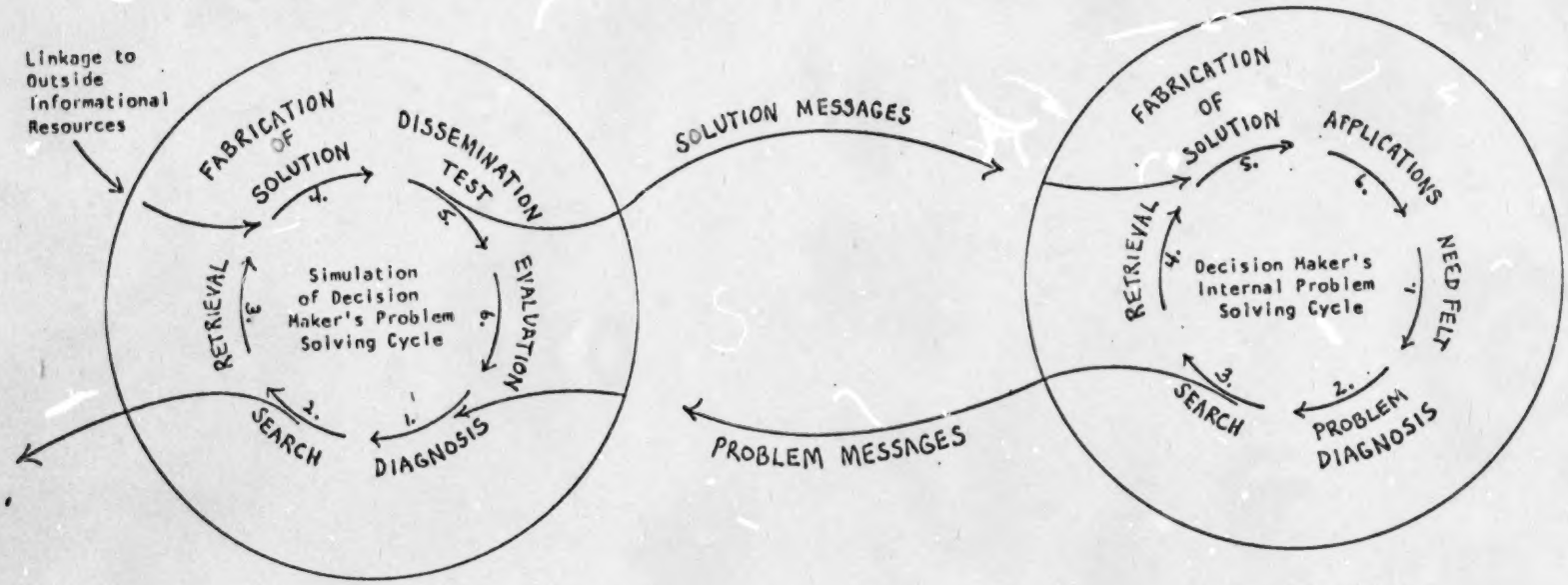
IDEALIZED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DECISION MAKER AND INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCHER

An idealized working relationship between the institutional researcher and decision maker is shown in diagrammatic form in Figure 1. It portrays a reciprocal relationship which requires that effective interpersonal contact be established and that both sides strive continuously to understand each other's problem-solving perspective. For their part, decision makers must take the time to give whatever guidance they can on the problems they assign, be ready to provide clarification when necessary, and be able to appreciate the research and evaluation capabilities of institutional researchers. The institutional researcher must strive to understand the context in which the decision maker operates; to know his values, assumptions, and objectives; and to apprehend the approach the decision maker might take himself in resolving the problem (Weis, 1975). Three additional points about the institutional researcher/decision maker relationship are made in the paragraphs below.

First, the development of on-going reciprocal relationships goes beyond the point of improving individual decision-making episodes. These relationships can lead to the creation of stable and long-lasting social influence channels between institutional researchers and decision makers.

Second, a dyadic notion of institutional researcher/decision maker relationships is simplistic. In reality, they are much more complex. As shown in Figure 1, the institutional researcher is generally linked to outside information resources. More importantly, he frequently must work on a problem with several decision makers who may dislike one another or disagree on a solution.

Figure 1 Idealized Relationship Between Decision Maker and Institutional Researcher.*



*This diagram is a simplified version of a figure appearing in Havelock's Planning for Innovation (1969, pp. 11-16).

Third, the paper's emphasis on the importance of effective interpersonal contact between the institutional researcher and decision maker contrasts with much of the institutional research literature. That literature, by virtue of the issues it focuses upon, implicitly assumes that the principal problem in institutional research is the provision of information which is technically and methodologically sound. This paper argues that effective interpersonal contact, which enables the institutional researcher and the decision maker to understand each other's values, priorities, problems and methological biases, is a precondition for effective institutional research support. Gurel (1975) makes the same point about the relationship of social program evaluators and program managers.

CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING TO CONFLICT

There are four basic conditions contributing to conflict between decision makers and institutional researchers. These include: differing organizational roles, value conflicts, status discrepancy and ambiguity, and communications breakdowns. The terms used to characterize these conditions in the sections below are used in the descriptive rather than normative sense.

Differing Organizational Roles

The decision maker and institutional researcher fulfill different roles in the organization. Katz and Kahn's (1966) classification scheme for organizational functions is used to distinguish between the two roles.

Decision makers perform what Katz and Kahn (1966) call the managerial function. In general, managerial groups are responsible for resolving conflicts between hierarchical levels, coordinating and directing the activities of subsystems, and coordinating external requirements with organizational resources and needs. They operate in high pressure, political environments using primarily the "dynamic of compromise" (p. 95).

Institutional researchers serve an intelligence-gathering role for the organization. They assemble information for the decision maker about the internal functioning of the organization and about its environment to guide the development of policies and procedures. Katz and Kahn (1966) refer to these functions as the regulatory and adaptive functions. Most of the information gathered by the institutional researcher, particularly that having to do with the enrironment, is change oriented. Frequently it entails a threat to the organization and to decision makers in particular. From these implied threats conflicts sometimes ensue.

Value Conflicts

Because they serve different organizational roles and have different professional backgrounds and career patterns, value differences do exist between decision makers and institutional researchers. Argyris (1971), Churchman and Schainblatt (1969), Dror (1971), and Gurel (1975) note that the two groups take qualitatively different approaches to problem solving.

Decision makers tend to view decision making quasi-mystically as an act which should be entrusted only to the experienced politician or executive. These individuals are generally political and compromise oriented, deal with problems in a piecemeal or incremental fashion, and are sometimes threatened by institutional researchers and their sophisticated analytical techniques.

Institutional researchers, on the other hand, are generally apolitical, rational, scholarly, sometimes intellectually arrogant, and inclined to take comprehensive approaches to problems. The tools of their trade are aimed principally at providing rational and comprehensive analyses of a problem and developing optimal solutions.

Status Discrepancy and Ambiguity

Decision makers and institutional researchers are not always happy with the roles they play in their relationships. Decision makers frequently resent being dependent on institutional researchers. Institutional researchers, for their part, often dislike being cast in a "supportive" role.

However, status discrepancy is generally less of a problem in the decision maker/institutional researcher relationship than status ambiguity. In effect working relationships, the two individuals must work quite closely together. Because each has a unique perspective and can make a genuine contribution to the decision-making process, it frequently becomes difficult to

distinguish between the leader and the follower. Thus, on occasion, both sides find such ambiguity threatening.

Communications Breakdowns

Holtzman (1970) indicates that good communications are essential to successful collaboration between the institutional researcher and decision maker. There appear to be three basic reasons for communications breakdowns.

The first factor is what Holtzman (1970) categorizes as simplistic one-way models of communication. Such models lead to what Havelock (1969) describes as being-out-of-phase. The institutional researcher may give a solution before the decision maker has articulated his problem or the institutional researcher does not have a solution when the decision maker needs one.

A second factor is overload. Katz and Kahn (1966) define overload as information inputs in excess of those that the decision maker can handle. Frequently institutional researchers provide far more information than the decision maker can comprehend or make their messages virtually incomprehensible. Decision makers, for their parts, can contribute to the problem by failing to provide clear problem definitions.

A third factor is the language barrier. Institutional researchers and decision makers sometimes do not speak the same language literally or figuratively. A major problem in recent years has been the growth of technical or jargonistic language in the social and management sciences. This language has infiltrated institutional research through the application of sophisticated analytical techniques drawn from these fields.

FACTORS REDUCING CONFLICT

There are seven factors which can reduce conflict between institutional researchers and decision makers. These include: linkage, structure, openness, capacity, reward, proximity, and persistence.

Linkage

Linkage is the degree of interpersonal connection and collaboration between the decision maker and the institutional researcher and the extent to which mutual communication exists between the two. The more the two "like" each other and can collaborate in a genuine way, the more effective will be their day-to-day contact and exchange of information. Churchman and Schainblatt (1969) note that both the institutional researcher and decision maker must recognize that they do not have all the answers and that each can make an important contribution to the decision-making process. This, they add, requires a certain "humility" (p. 187) on the part of both. Argyris (1971), Fowler (1970), and Holtzman (1970) suggest that effective interpersonal relationships and communications between institutional researchers and decision makers may be the critical factors in determining the ultimate success of their collaboration.

Structure

Decision making should take place within a coherent structure which designates a rational sequence of steps, responsibility for coordination, and a division of labor. Effective collaboration requires that the institutional researcher and decision maker have a common understanding of the problem on which they are working, the constraints affecting the problem, the steps which must be taken to solve the problem, and an idea of what each must do to achieve the solution. The degree to which

they are able to develop a structure and abide by it will determine the effectiveness of their decision making. Churchman and Schainblatt (1969) go so far as to suggest that the institutional researcher and decision maker structure their relationship in a manner analogous to that employed in formalized debate. By this means, they maintain, the two different perspectives can be brought fully to bear on a decision-making problem.

Openness

Openness is the degree to which there is a readiness to give and receive information between the institutional researcher and decision maker. Persons with closed minds by definition are incapable of collaborating effectively and receiving new ideas. Openness is vitally important to the quality of the decision-making process.

For the institutional researcher, openness means a desire to help and to listen to the decision maker's problems. For the decision maker, it is more than a passive receptivity to help; it is a desire to reach out for new ideas and experiment and a willingness to adapt and embrace change.

Capacity

Capacity is the extent to which decision makers and institutional researchers can communicate large volumes of information effectively in their decision-making tasks. For institutional researchers, this means keeping communications short, using the simplest available analytical techniques which are appropriate to the problem, and minimizing the use of jargon. For decision makers, it is the ability to communicate their priorities and problems clearly and to receive information effectively.

Reward

Reward is the extent to which the decision maker and the institutional researcher are reinforced by working together. The institutional researcher is rewarded when his work has an impact on the decision-making process and is appreciated by others. For the decision maker, reward is the relative advantage that he believes he receives from using the services of the institutional researcher.

Proximity

An important factor which is frequently overlooked is the hierarchical and physical proximity of the decision maker and the institutional researcher. Decision makers who are in close proximity to their institutional researchers are more likely to use them. Institutional researchers who have easy access to the decision makers they support are more likely to have an impact on the decision-making process.

Persistence

Persistence is the extent to which a message bearing on a given decision-making problem is repeated purposefully and effectively to achieve the desired result. Holtzman (1970) maintains that institutional researchers must find new ways to validate their recommendations to decision makers if they want to gain acceptance of their views. Frequently persistence, which does not grate, is required to communicate abstruse new ideas.

Interrelationships Among the Factors

Havelock (1969) points out that there are interrelationships and conflicts among the factors. For example, proximity and openness are preconditions for effective linkage. Reward also appears to be a precondition

to linkage, and a result of structure. On the other hand, structure can stifle openness, and openness without structure can lead to chaos. Obviously the seven factors form a complex web of interrelationships.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Two comments are provided in conclusion. First, the problem of establishing a relationship between the institutional researcher and decision maker is a two-way street. If either side does not desire to form a relationship, there is little that can be done to alter the situation.

Second, the paper represents a first attempt to conceptualize the working relationship of institutional researchers and decision makers. It is not intended as a prescription for institutional researchers who want to establish or improve relationships with the decision makers they support. Further theoretical development and research in specific settings are required before such applications can occur. It is hoped that this paper has generated sufficient interest in the problem to lead to the development of models which can be applied to actual institutional researcher/decision maker relationships.

REFERENCES

Argyris, C. Management information systems: the challenge to rationality and emotionality. Management Science, 1971, 17, B-275 - B-292.

Churchman, C. S., & Schainblatt, A. H. PPB: how can it be implemented? Public Administration Review, 1969, 29, 178-202.

Coser, L. The functions of social conflict. New York: The Free Press, 1956.

Dror, Y. Design for the policy sciences. New York: American Elsevier, 1971.

Fowler, F. P. The high cost of non-involvement between the researcher and the policy maker, Proceedings of the 10th Annual Forum on Institutional Research 1970, 143.

Gurel, L. The human side of evaluating human services programs: problems and prospects. In M. Guttentag and E. L. Struening (Eds.), Handbook of evaluation research. Vol II, Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1975.

Katz, D., & Kahn, R. L. The social psychology of organizations. New York: Wiley, 1966.

Havelock, R. G. Planning for innovation. Ann Arbor, Mi.: Institute for Social Research, 1969.

Holtzman, P. D. The institutional researcher as communicator: improving communication capabilities. Proceedings of the 10th Annual Forum on Institutional Research, 1970, 14-16.

Mason, T. R. Fiscal management and institutional priorities: how can institutional research help. Liberal Education, 1971, 57, 219-223.

Weiss, C. H. Evaluation research in the political context. In E. L. Struening and M. Guttentag (Eds.), Handbook of evaluation research. Vol I, Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1975.